Developing a Leadership Philosophy

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IT IS A MEMORABLE DAY. The sun is shinning, there is a gentle breeze that causes the flags and their campaign ribbons to rustle, and the soldiers are standing tall in formation. A time-honored tradition is about to take place—a change of command. The orders are read, the colors are passed and a new leader takes charge of the organization.

More often than not, however, there are no formal ceremonies when an officer takes over a new position, yet the first order of business is always the same—the discussion of a leadership philosophy, usually accompanied by a "philosophy document." This "philosophy" ostensibly allows the supporting staff and soldiers to understand the leader's inner thoughts, beliefs and expectations for organizational performance.

We have all been in organizations where this scenario unfolds. Many times the leadership philosophy is hastily prepared. Quite often, leaders are in demanding jobs until they assume new positions and do not have the luxury of time for genuine reflection about their personal leadership philosophy. Most write some peripheral thoughts about leadership, beliefs and personal philosophy, discuss it with immediate subordinates and send their philosophy paper to elements within the organization.

While attending the US Army War College (AWC), Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, I had the opportunity to take a *Philosophy of Leadership* advance course, which included considerable discussion, reading and reflection on the subject. The students in the class represented a wide cross-section of the Armed Forces and included men and women, all services, minorities, combat, combat support and combat service support officers. All students in the class were assigned to follow-on brigade-level command or senior leadership staff positions. At the course conclusion, each officer was asked to write a personal leadership philosophy.

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In writing this article, I obtained selections of leadership philosophy papers from the *Philosophy of Command* course for the past several years. I reviewed them to determine common themes that should be incorporated into my leadership philosophy. Virtually all future leaders agreed that vision, values, care for soldiers and families, leader development, managing change, diversity and a sense of humor were imperatives within a leadership philosophy. Although I read a host of articles, I selected the above elements as a framework for this article and suggest they should be the blueprint for every Army leader's personal leadership philosophy.

While the primary audience for this article is mid-level to senior leaders, all supervisors will find the information presented useful in developing their own personal leadership philosophy.

Why is a Philosophy of Leadership Important?

Philosophy is "the rational investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge or conduct."[1] In his discussion of values, author Scott W. Clarke captures the significance of a personal philosophy for the military leader. He indicates that

philosophy is the attainment of an integrated, comprehensive view of life, of vital importance. He further relates that "values, ethics and virtues are actually secondary. . ." to the absolute necessity to couch these attributes within a personal philosophy.[2] In other words, *your* personal philosophy provides a foundation for all other issues—it is your personal foundation or belief in human nature or behavior. As an example, we refer to an interview with Lieutenant General Robert F. McDermott, US Air Force, Retired, and retired chief executive officer (CEO), United Services Automobile Association (USAA). He indicated that his overarching personal leadership philosophy was based on the "Golden Rule"—all values and ethical behavior stemmed from it. This simplistic personal philosophy served McDermott well for 25 years of military service in peace and war, and for 25 years as the head of USAA, a Fortune 500 company.[3]

Whether *you* select the Golden Rule or another philosophical approach, you must establish your overarching personal philosophy before you can extrapolate from it the framework of key issues, that follow.

Vision

The first element to consider in developing a philosophy of leadership—vision—is the most confusing and has been described as similar to "nailing Jello to a wall." So what is vision and what does it consist of? One of the best general descriptions of vision comes from Burt Nanus' book *Visionary Leadership*. He contends that vision must be idealistic and a "mental model of a future state of the . . . organization."[4] He asserts that vision must also possess the properties of appropriateness, standards of excellence, purpose and direction. Ultimately the organizational vision must be ambitious, easily articulated and well understood. In other words, *"Where there is no vision, the people perish."*[5]

I believe that organizational vision is most similar to the Army concept of *commander's intent.* US Army Field Manual 100-5, *Operations,* describes commander's intent as the description of operational purpose and endstate.[6] *Purpose* is what you want the organization to do—it is the single unifying focus of the operation. *Method* is generally how you intend for your subordinates to carry out their jobs. *Endstate* is what you want the final result to be. If we apply Nanus' definition of vision to the description of commander's intent, we could describe vision as "the mental image of what you want the organization to do in the future, how you believe it should generally accomplish this transition or journey and what the organization should look like at the end of the transition or journey."

Whether you agree with this definition or prefer another, vision must be communicated, shared and understood by all within the organization if the organization is to succeed. In his leadership article, "Three Vital Little Words," Oren Harari discusses the importance of sharing and communicating vision in order to inspire people's emotion and challenge subordinates to attain organization goals for the future.[7] Another example extracted from an AWC *Philosophy of Leadership* paper states "My organization will flounder if I don't provide a meaningful vision. [Therefore, I must] create the vision. Keep it clear, concise, energetic, creative, relevant and achievable. [E]nsure it defines the purpose and direction of the brigade. Share it, sell it. Focus on the "buy in" of subordinate leaders; particularly junior officers and NCOs. Inspire their enthusiasm. Assess the vision; keep it alive.[8]

Members of your organization need to know—through your leadership philosophy—that you value and will listen to every member. In your philosophy, you should generally articulate the mechanisms that you intend to use during your leadership tenure. A few that come to mind include: open-door policy, small-group sensing sessions, getting out of the office daily and visibility within the organization. Finally, your subordinates must know that you will not tolerate those who do not value diversity in the organization.

Subordinates must buy into the vision, support it and act on it, or organizational success will be minimized. In this regard, I believe vision and commander's intent are again synonymous since both must be understood by all elements within an organization.

Perhaps a good description of vision and intent is exemplified during complex Army airborne operations. Under difficult circumstances, Army paratroopers may become disoriented or separated from their leaders. However, when the commander's intent (vision) has been communicated with subordinates, soldiers are able to continue operations because they fully understand and share the common purpose (what), methodology (how) and end state (objective) of their tasks. I believe

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that the same concepts of shared purpose, general methodology and objective can be applied to all organizations and should be included in any personal philosophy of leadership.

Finally, I firmly subscribe to the concept of "vision and revision." This premise is discussed in John Redding and Ralph Catalanello's book *Strategic Readiness: The Making of a Learning Organization*.[9] The authors describe vision as similar to looking at a vista in the Rocky Mountains. The end state of the vision may not be visible because you cannot see through the mountains. In Army organizations, these intermediate mountains may be personnel and equipment changes, turbulence, improvements in doctrine and technology or other external, uncontrollable factors. The leader creates vision but only as far as he can see. Once the leader moves to an intermediate point in the journey of learning, the vision is adjusted. This process of vision and revision is essential to keep the organization viable, healthy and adaptable to change. As you undertake your voyage of organizational leadership, you should understand that the vision you describe in your leadership philosophy may only be a "way point" along your journey.

Values

In *The Book of Virtues*, author William Bennett remarks that "Today we speak about values and how it is important to "have them," as if they were beads on a string or marbles in a pouch. But [we] speak to morality and virtues not as something to be possessed, but as the central theme of human nature, not as something to have but as something to be, the most important thing to be.[10] Reflecting similar sentiment, the US Army is an organization whose "values are the foundation for service to the nation."[11] Although many values have been ascribed to our Army, we believe that the seven values articulated by Army Chief of Staff General Dennis J. Reimer best describe those required for any organization:

Loyalty: Bear true faith and allegiance to the US Constitution, the Army, your unit and other soldiers.

Duty: Fulfill your obligations.

Respect: Treat people as they should be treated.

Selfless-Service: Put the welfare of the nation, the Army and your subordinates before your own.

Honor: Live up to all the Army values.

Integrity: Do what's right, legally and morally.

Personal Courage: Face fear, danger or adversity (physical or moral).[12]

These values serve as our moral compass to guide every soldier, from private to general, through the maze of intellectual, philosophical and emotional issues that encompass our life and Army. Every Army leader should personally ascribe to these seven values, include them as an integral part of his leadership philosophy and discuss them in detail with subordinates in terms of specific relevance and application within their organizations. Robert Haas, Levi Strauss and Company CEO, believes that a company's values—what it stands for, and what its people believe in—are crucial to organizational success.[13]

I suggest that those who think values cannot be trained or changed are incorrect and would refer them to the US Marine Corps model for basic training. The Marine Corps imbues in its initial training program the core values of honor, integrity and courage. Examples of this value training include lecture and discussion in the form of value-related vignettes, reinforcement of values that are related to training events and designing experiences that test the mettle of values.[14] The Marine Corps believes that values can be changed or learned through positive experiences—so should you!

Furthermore, I maintain that a lack of understanding and discussion of values within some Army organizations is the overwhelming reason for a number of events involving charges of unethical behavior that have been publicized by the media.

It is the leader's foremost responsibility to serve as an Army values role model, discuss their particular application within the organization and apply decisive corrective action when the organization's values become distorted or compromised. One such philosophy states "Respect is key. Trust is vital. I will set the moral and ethical standards within the brigade. I must maintain formal training programs to foster values within the organization."[15]

Caring for Soldiers

Lieutenant General William M. Steele, former 82d Airborne Division commander from 1993 to 1995, led many of his leader discussions by describing the division's two imperatives—successful mission accomplishment and taking care of soldiers and their families. He indicated that although these two imperatives often appear to compete, great leaders always find a way to accomplish both.

We have all been taught the importance of caring for our soldiers, those who work for us and their families. Although the imperative of caring for people embraces a wide variety of issues, research suggests that the key issues include quality of life, proper training and equipment, safety, family support and timely recognition for a job well done. We are not discussing platitudes to be incorporated into your leadership philosophy. You must embrace these issues as your own, and live them, for they directly affect our nation's treasure—its soldiers. This leadership attribute is described in then Brigadier General Robert H. Scales Jr.'s book, *Certain Victory: The United States in the Gulf War*. "The Army's aggressive program to provide for soldier's welfare served as an essential catalyst for unit bonding and coalescence. . . . Soldiers fight best when led by effective, caring leaders. Modern combat . . . requires love of soldiers and soldiering that has been a hallmark of the American Army for more than two centuries.[16]

Leader Development

You should include three essential leader-development components in your leadership philosophy: formal schooling, leader training within your organization and empowerment.

There are countless opportunities for formal professional military development and schooling. Enlisted soldiers can attend Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course, Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course and numerous other courses that will enhance professional development. Officers have the basic and advanced courses, Combined Arms

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Lieutenant Colonel Mike Reagor volunteers his time to coach the Fort Leavenworth Under 10 Premier soccer team in the Kansas City Invitational soccer tournament.

Lori Larsen

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and Services Staff School, Command and General Staff College and other courses that allow them to become more versed in their specialties. While these formal educational opportunities often conflict with exercises or training, it is imperative leaders allow their subordinates to attend school. Although detailed long-range planning can prevent many major scheduling pitfalls, there is never a "good time" to allow your soldiers to attend professional and leader development opportunities. Leaders must make the time available; it is ultimately an investment in the individual and our Army's organizational future.

The next consideration in leader development is the training accomplished within your organization. Your philosophy must address your expectations concerning how the organization grows leaders and the type of corresponding training you intend to implement. You should consider the following:

- Establish clear, measurable, challenging and achievable goals for your leader development program (LDP).
- Never delegate your organization's LDP or it will be doomed to failure or mediocrity. Leaders develop leaders! Effective LDPs take extraordinary personal time energy, and commitment to foster team building and facilitate coaching, counseling and progressive learning. Like formal schooling, however, the return on leader training investment is successful individual and organizational futures.
- Leader development occurs best in one-on-one situations or in small groups. Large officer professional development sessions are appropriate for passing information, but not conducive to individual learning and leadership development.

As one colonel put it, "Leader development is a lifetime process and has three components. Our leader development programs must be a blend of education, training and experience. I will support attendance by our personnel at formal Army school-

ing as we will supplement the education provided by Army schools with our own vigorous in-house professional development programs. Due to the rapid pace of technology change today, learning must be a continuous process."[17]

The last consideration, and perhaps the best method for leader development, is *empowering* subordinates. One of the harder tasks for senior leaders to master, yet the mark of a great leader, is *delegating*. Leaders and supervisors must delegate to subordinates to encourage leadership growth within the organization. Without empowering subordinates, organizational progress and growth is significantly stifled. "Empowerment is a powerful tool to provide every individual with a sense of pride in performance. . . . People should be given the tools to make good decisions, then allowed to demonstrate their ability. Mistakes should be tolerated to provide for growth of the individual. This should be tempered with a critical analysis of the individual's ability."[18]

Managing Change

Anyone who has ever tried to initiate organizational change has probably heard, "We tried that and it didn't work" or "We have always done it this way." Change is not always easy for an organization's members. However, change is inevitable. In a 1995 survey conducted with the top Fortune 100 highest-revenue companies, the number one human resource issue was managing change.[19] With downsizing, frequent deployments, rapid technology and increasing operations tempo and personnel tempo, the Army has had to deal with significant change. A leader's ability to manage change is a critical skill now and in the future.

Senior leaders can manage change by recognizing that change is inevitable and strive to master it; or sit back, resist and allow it to overtake the organization.[20] If the leader chooses to sit back, then the organization will surely fail. The two keys to successful change in any organization are the leader and its members. Thus, the leader must clearly articulate the reason for the change, and how it ties into the organization's mission and purpose. The simple act of communicating the reason for the change is not enough. People resist change and do so for a variety of reasons. "Most people are perfectly content with the status quo. . . . When a large body is in motion, it takes considerable force to alter its course. . . . Humans have an innate fear of the unknown. . . . Change threatens our self-esteem. . . . Change requires the powerful to admit they have been wrong."[21]

Leaders and their subordinates must quickly mesh in their organizations. A philosophy of leadership—whether written, verbal or both—is an appropriate mechanism for the members of the organization to get to understand you as the leader. The philosophy should be from your heart and in your own words. It provides the best opportunity up front to state your priorities, goals and areas of emphasis for your organization. Ultimately, whatever leadership philosophy you select, you must live the philosophy. Remember, "There is no one recipe for success as a senior leader. . . . However . . . my own core values . . . will form the bedrock of my . . . philosophy. . . . I have a good feeling about this! There will be a wealth of talent, ingenuity and commitment waiting for me."

The organization's members must "buy into" the change, so it is up to the leader to communicate the reason for the change, why it is important and how it will improve the organization. Leaders must address change in their leadership philosophy and inform the organization how change will be managed.

Diversity

One area of leadership philosophy often overlooked is the strength of leveraging diversity in our organizations. We all look alike from a distance, and the Army of necessity, encourages uniformity. However, when we get close, we recognize the distinct and marvelous differences in each soldier within our unit. Men and women, of various ethnic, racial, religious backgrounds and experiences, reflect the treasured differences that make us a unique and powerful organization. This variety provides organizational richness that gives leaders—if willing to leverage the diversity—myriad ways to tackle issues and challenges and ultimately find better solutions.

Members of your organization need to know—through your leadership philosophy—that you value and will listen to every member. In your philosophy, you should generally articulate the mechanisms that you intend to use during your leadership tenure. A few that come to mind include: open-door policy, small-group sensing sessions, getting out of the office daily and visibility within the organization. Finally, your subordinates must know that you will not tolerate those who do not value diversity in the organization.

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Maintain a Sense of Humor

Although having a sense of humor is not a theme in everyone's philosophy of leadership, I believe it is important and extremely healthy for a positive command climate. In fact, James Thurber remarked that "Humor is a serious thing. I like to think of it as one of our great and earliest national resources which must be preserved at all costs."[22] You have to know how to laugh, especially at yourself. Humor can very often diffuse a potentially tense situation. For those serious-minded pragmatic leaders, Gillian Flynn's article "Career Advancement May be a Laughing Matter" suggests that ". . . a good sense of humor helps build personal rapport and a greater spirit of cooperation."[23] A suggestion—when all else fails, you had better be able to laugh!

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In developing a credible leadership philosophy, follow these seven imperatives—vision, values, care of soldiers and families, leader development, change, diversity and humor. Whatever the leadership level or type of organization you lead, you owe it to those who work for you to develop a thoughtful, comprehensive and realistic leadership philosophy. No leadership philosophy can address all of the issues you will confront, but it will serve as a solid start point that will be understood by you but, more important, by those you lead. ***MR***

NOTES

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